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Some Cultural Differences in the Perception of Social Behavior

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**Communication, Cooperation and Negotiation
in Culturally Heterogeneous Groups**

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ABSTRACT

Cultural differences in the perception of social behaviors were studied by presentation of 120 social behaviors (e.g., to hit, to command, to copy, etc.) to three samples of respondents: Greek females, American females, American males. The respondents made Thurstone equal appearing interval scale judgements in which the 120 behaviors constituted the stimuli. The judgmental continua were defined by the words: Gives Affect vs. Denies Affect; Gives Status vs. Denies Status; Intimacy vs. Formality; and No Trace of Hostility vs. Maximum Hostility. (These dimensions were found to be culture common, between Americans and Greeks, in previous factor analytic work.) Numerous cultural differences in the perception of social behavior were observed. They are discussed in relation to previous studies of American and Greek national character.

Some Cultural Differences in the Perception of Social Behavior ¹

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It is a frequent observation among persons who have engaged in social interactions with persons from other cultures that their behaviors are sometimes "misinterpreted" and their intentions "misunderstood." For example, a person from one culture may provide what he considers to be "friendly criticism" to a person from another culture only to discover that the other person interprets it as "hatred." Or, a person from culture A behaves in a manner which he considers extremely "positive" toward a person from culture B. However, the individual from culture B perceives the behavior as "neutral," and in turn, the individual from culture A feels that he is "given the cold shoulder." His negative reaction is then perceived as negative and a vicious circle of mutual negative reinforcement takes place. One possible explanation of such misinterpretations is that the meaning of the social behavior is not the same across cultures.

As part of a program of research to investigate the behavior of culturally heterogeneous groups, we have tested the hypothesis that cultures will differ in their perception of the meaning of social behaviors.

Method

Selection of a Sample of Social Behaviors: Triandis, Vassiliou, and Nassiakou

(1967) asked samples of American and Greek students to supply sentence completions

¹The data were collected under contract NR 177-472, Nonr 1834(36) with the Advanced Research Projects Agency and the Office of Naval Research to study "Communication, Cooperation and Negotiation in Culturally Heterogeneous Groups" (Fred E. Fiedler, Harry C. Triandis, and Lawrence M. Stolurow, Principal Investigators). Fred E. Fiedler, Uriel Foa, Charles E. Osgood, and David Summers made valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

to a set of 100 roles (e.g., father to son; prostitute to customer). The instructions required the Ss to supply a social behavior which they considered appropriate and likely to occur within each of these roles (e.g., father hits son). Samples of about 10,000 behaviors were obtained from each culture, and these were subjected to facet and factor analyses. A variety of factor analytic approaches (including two-mode factor analysis) yielded four culture-common factors. The four major culture-common factors were (1) Giving vs. Denying Affect (defined by high loadings on the behaviors to love, to admire, to help vs. to hate, to despise, to be prejudiced against;) (2) Giving vs. Denying Status (defined by high loadings on obey be commanded by, accept criticism of, vs. treat as a subordinate, command, give advice to;) (3) Intimacy vs. Formality (e.g., to have sexual intercourse with, to marry, to pet vs. to appoint to important position, to send letter inviting to dinner, let join own club;) and (4) Hostility (e.g., throw rocks at, insult, exclude from the neighborhood.) Sixty American and 60 Greek behaviors having high loadings on one or another of these 4 culture-common factors were selected for the present study.

Procedure: The 120 behaviors mentioned were translated into the "other language," so that a list of 120 behaviors was available in each culture. The list was then presented to psychology students Ss with Thurstone equal appearing interval scale instructions (Edwards, 1957). The Ballin and Farnsworth (1941) graphic-rating method was used. The four continua utilized by the Ss in making their judgments were defined as follows:

"Giving vs. denying affect: Giving affect means to feel positively about the other person. To love is an example of a social behavior which is high on "giving affect." To hate is an example of denying affect. Read all behaviors listed in this sheet. Select the one behavior which you consider to be most extreme in giving affect and place it in category 11. Then select the one behavior which you consider to be most extreme in denying affect and place it in

category 1. Then, judge the other behaviors in this list and place each of them in one of the 11 categories provided to you."

"Giving vs. denying status: Giving status means to make the other person feel strong, powerful, great. Denying status means to make the other person feel weak, powerless, small. To beg is an example of giving status, to command is an example of denying status. Read all behaviors..."

"Formal vs. intimate behaviors: Extremely formal behaviors are the type that a head of state would undertake when interacting with another head of state. To send written invitation to a formal dinner is a formal behavior. Intimate behaviors are behaviors that are likely to occur within the family. To have sexual intercourse with is a very intimate behavior. Of course, this does not mean that all family behaviors are intimate or all behaviors between heads of state are formal. In between the two extremes there are behaviors which might be called informal. Read all behaviors..."

"Hostile behaviors: Hostile behaviors involve doing something which hurts another person. This dimension looks superficially like the denying of affect dimension, but there is actually a difference. For example, a mother may love her child and yet beat him. To beat under these conditions would be high in hostility and also high in giving affect. Read all behaviors..."

The Ss were provided with 11-point scales on which they entered the serial number associated with each behavior. The end-points of the scales were labeled as follows: Gives affect-denies affect; Gives status-denies status; Formal-Informal-Intimate; No trace of hostility-maximum hostility.

Subjects: Three samples of psychology undergraduates were employed: American males, Greek females (there are no males studying psychology in Greece). Since 120 behaviors had to be judged on four dimensions and it was felt that the 480 judgments would lead to fatigue and unreliability, the judgments were randomly divided into 4 equal sets. Each S completed 120 judgments. Since each of the Ss responded to a different combination of behavior-scale judgments, and since

they were also instructed not to make a judgment if they felt that the dimension was irrelevant, the number of judgments obtained had unequal Ns. The Ns for the Greeks ranged from 5 to 45, with a median of 25. The Ns for the Americans ranged from 7 to 30, with a median of 20.

Analysis: The medians of the distributions of the judgments as well as the interquartile range of these distributions were recorded. The medians of the judgments on the 4 dimensions were intercorrelated. Table 1 shows the correlations (N=120) between the samples.

The medians and interquartile ranges obtained for each behavior were employed to determine whether cultural differences existed in the judgments of the behaviors. Only differences significant beyond the .01 level were considered. Thus, we preferred to focus on only the most extreme cultural differences.

Results

Cross-Cultural Similarities

It is clear that the meaning of the four dimensions employed in the two cultures is very similar, otherwise we would not have obtained the high correlations of Table 1. In fact, the meaning across cultures is about as similar as it is across sex groups. Furthermore, Table 2 shows that the Ss did not make the discriminations that we expected them to make. Giving affect apparently implies giving status (e.g., to marry involves giving high affect and status) and low hostility despite our attempts to make the Ss discriminate between these dimensions.

The relationship between affect and intimacy was investigated. A plot of the medians reveals a reasonably clear curvilinear pattern. Extremely intimate behaviors are either extreme in giving affect (e.g., to marry) or in denying affect (e.g., to despise). On the other hand, formal behaviors involve giving moderate amounts of affect. There is, however, one exception to this pattern: behaviors that have a very strong relevance to the giving and denying status dimension (e.g., command, be commanded, appoint to important job) are judged as

Table 1

**Correlations between the Medians of the Behaviors
on the Four Dimensions**

Dimension	Correlations between Medians of		
	American Males and Females	American Females and Greek Females	American Males and Greek Females
Affect	.94	.89	.90
Status	.83	.59	.86
Intimacy	.43	.58	.62
Hostility	.91	.90	.90

N = 120

All correlations are significant
beyond the $p < .001$ level.

Note: There are no males studying psychology in Greece.

Table 2
Correlations among the Four Dimensions for
American and Greek Females

Dimensions	Americans	Greeks
Affect and Status	.82 ***	.84 ***
Affect and Intimacy	-.12	.24 *
Affect and Hostility	-.89 ***	-.93 ***
Status and Intimacy	-.11	.03
Status and Hostility	-.76 ***	-.84 ***
Intimacy and Hostility	.13	-.12 *

N = 120

* p < .05

***p < .001

extremely formal and either denying affect (e.g., to command) or giving affect (e.g., appoint...). As a result, the graph of intimacy and affect has points (behaviors) in all four of its corners. Moreover, the behaviors that are found in each corner are rather similar. Thus, the high-intimacy-giving-affect corner has to love, to marry, to have sexual intercourse with, to date, to kiss, to pet, to cuddle, etc., all behaviors identified as part of the Marital Acceptance factor in Triandis' (1964) factor analysis of social behaviors. The high-intimacy-denying-affect corner includes despise, throw rocks at, exclude from the neighborhood, be prejudiced against, etc., all behaviors associated with the Social Distance factor of Triandis's factor analysis. The formal-denying-affect corner has behaviors such as command, be commanded, look down upon, etc. These are behaviors that had high loadings on Triandis's Superordination-Subordination factor. The fourth corner, formal-giving-affect, includes behaviors such as appoint to important job, enjoy working for, obey, let join own club, look up to, etc., which appear similar to the Respect factor of the Triandis analysis. Finally, the Friendship factor of that analysis includes behaviors which involve giving affect, but without formality or intimacy. These behaviors are found in between the Marital and Respect factors in the plot. Thus, the present analysis suggests that the five factors obtained by Triandis (1964) can be reduced to two basic dimensions of interpersonal behavior: affect and intimacy.

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences in the perception of social behaviors were studied by an examination of a table such as Table 3. To save space, the information of Table 3 has been greatly abbreviated.

The perception of a given behavior was considered as being different across cultures if the following two criteria were met: (a) the two American samples were similar while the Greek sample differed from them in one or the other direction on a particular dimension; (b) the difference between the average medians

Table 3: Example of Data Used to Obtain the Cultural Differences

Dimension: Affect

Samples: Identif. No. of the Behaviors	American Males			American Females			Greek Females		
	N	Q ₃ -Q ₁	Median	N	Q ₃ -Q ₁	Median	N	Q ₃ -Q ₁	Median
1	22	1.4	8.2	16	2.0	7.3	20	3.3	7.0
2	17	2.1	8.6	17	2.2	7.5	30	3.0	7.6
3	13	2.3	5.0	15	1.6	5.5	18	4.5	7.3
4	18	3.3	6.9	23	3.3	6.7	24	4.3	6.4
...

Note: For each Dimension there are 120 rows, since there are 120 behaviors. Since there are 4 dimensions, the table has 480 rows.

of the two American samples and the median of the Greek sample was greater than three-quarters of the square root of the average interquartile range of the three samples. This criterion was derived from first principles. It requires the assumption that the medians are the best estimates of the means of the distributions of judgments and the portion of the distribution between the Q_1 and Q_3 points includes 50% of the cases under a normal curve. In other words, it assumes a normal distribution of the judgments. It is designed to yield a p less than .01 when there are 15 S s in each sample. Since there are usually more than 15 S s in a sample, this is a conservative criterion.

Examination of entries such as those of Table 3 suggest the following cultural differences:

1. On the Affect Dimension: Greeks see to compete with as implying denying of affect; Americans see it as affectively neutral. Greeks are exceptionally competitive (Triandis & Vassiliou, 1966; Triandis, Vassiliou, & Nassiakou, 1967), with members of their outgroups and non-competitive with members of their ingroup (family and close friends). Competition is not conceived as "a game," in the American sense, but as "deadly serious" activity in which it is not enough to win, but is also important to humiliate the opposition.

Greeks see more giving of affect than do Americans in the behaviors to thank, to praise, and to appreciate. These behaviors occur within the ingroup, but not with members of outgroups. For example, Greeks praise their children rather blatantly, but they almost never praise anyone with whom they are competing.

A similar pattern occurs for to help, to advise, to feel sorry for. As Triandis, Vassiliou and Nassiakou (1967) have shown, these behaviors are most salient in the mother-child relationship, i.e., in a role which is characterized by extreme positive affect. Analyses of the motivational patterns of Greek

adolescents (Vassiliou and Katakis, in preparation)² suggest a high frequency of themes in which love is expressed by helping and advising or counseling and absence of these behaviors is interpreted as "lack of love."

The Greeks see more positive affect in the behavior to enjoy working for than do Americans. This behavior in Greece has the connotation that the employee is feeling loyal to the employer, which requires that he "do extra things" to please the employer. Thus, enjoying working for somebody is likely to imply "going out of your way to help him," even when you are not asked to help, if a difficult moment requires additional effort. Conversely, the employees enjoy working for an employer who will be responsive to their idiosyncratic needs, special requests for exemptions from general rules, etc.

Greeks see to complain to as involving giving of affect and intimacy. In Greece one complains to the ingroup and protests to the outgroup members.

On the other hand, Greeks see more denying of affect than do Americans in the behaviors to be indifferent to and to punish. In Greece, parents are quite permissive and employ punishment only after a situation has gotten out of control. Thus, punishment occurs for serious offenses only, in which the relative level of affect is quite negative.

Moreover, Greeks see less giving of affect in look up to, be proud of, and cuddle than do Americans. These behaviors are expected within the ingroup and they are not particularly indicative of extreme affect.

Finally, the Greeks see more denying of affect in to swear at and to envy.

On the Status Dimension: The Greeks see more giving of status compared

²Vassiliou, Vasso and Katakis, Hariklia. Motivational patterns of Greek adolescents and young adults, as obtained from Story Sequence Analyses. In preparation.

to Americans in the behaviors to compete with, reward, flatter, discuss with, inform, learn with help of, compliment, and look up to. On the other hand, they see less giving of status in the behaviors accept as close kin by marriage and have sexual intercourse with.

On the other hand, the Greeks see more denying of status than do Americans on the behaviors to be impatient with, to be indifferent to, to be embarrassed by, to accuse, to envy, to inspect work of, and to protect.

On the Intimacy Dimension: The Greeks see a number of behaviors as more intimate than do the Americans. Thus, to annoy, to quarrel with, to ask for advice of, to scold, to study with, to advise, to complain to, to be grateful to, to hit, to be friend of, to learn with help of, to laugh at jokes of, to enjoy company of, to correct, to like, to kiss, to go to movies with, to protect, to wish good luck to, to share responsibility with, to work with, to be loyal to, to date, are seen as more intimate in Greece than in America.

On the other hand, the Greeks see less intimacy than do Americans in the behaviors to despise, ask for forgiveness, invite to dinner, congratulate, depend upon, mourn for, follow instructions, and be commanded by.

On the Hostility Dimension: Greeks see more hostility than do Americans in to quarrel, to compete, to exploit, to cheat, to be indifferent to, feel inferior to, punish, to be sarcastic to, accept orders from, laugh at, cheat, blame for failure, dislike, and envy.

On the other hand, they see less hostility than Americans in the behaviors grow impatient with, anger, and be prejudiced against.

Finally, the Greeks see practically no trace of hostility, while Americans see some, in the behaviors feel sorry for, teach, talk to, be friend of, compliment, argue with, approve of, confess sins to, go to movies with, work for, be proud of, and understand. Most of these behaviors, except argue

with, are "very positive." The explanation for the argue with behavior is that Greeks argue "for fun" much more than do Americans (Triandis and Lambert, 1958).

Generally, the Greeks tend to exaggerate their judgments on the hostility dimension, so that when a behavior involves giving affect, it is seen as having very little hostility; conversely, when the behavior involves denying affect, it is seen as implying more hostility than is the case for the Americans.

Discussion

There are numerous differences in the perception of social behaviors. Many of these differences appear meaningful to those of us who have been exposed to the two cultures under study. Further research is needed to establish the importance of such differences in the determination of the outcomes of social behavior.

It is notable that on 23 behaviors the Greeks see more intimacy than do the Americans and on only 8 there is the reverse pattern. This result is consistent with the finding of Triandis, Vassiliou and Nassiakou (1967) who found greater perception of intimacy within roles in Greece than in America.

The implication of such differences is that an American interacting with a Greek might behave inappropriately for the level of intimacy that is appropriate at a particular time, because he may not realize that more intimacy is required before the particular behavior is permissible. Thus, for example, he may try to kiss, to quarrel with, to ask for advice of, to advise, to laugh at jokes of, to correct, etc. before the Greek sees that the relationship is "ripe" for "such intimacies." On the other hand, he may wait too long before he invites to dinner, congratulates, mourns for, etc., than would be appropriate from the Greek's point of view since, for instance, a dinner

invitation does not require as much intimacy in Greece as it requires in the United States.

Another kind of "cross-cultural interaction mistake" would be not to realize the significance of certain behaviors in terms of their implications for denying affect. Thus, to be indifferent to, to punish, etc., are seen as denying affect to a much greater extent in Greece than in America. The Greek on his side can make the cultural mistake of assuming that he is reinforcing the American more than he really is when he helps him, advises him, praises, appreciates him, etc.

We might speculate that the degree to which a behavior is seen as involving the giving of affect is related to the extent to which it is reinforcing (using Thibaut and Kelley (1959) language -- the extent to which it provides rewards). Those behaviors that are seen as denying affect provide negative reinforcement, i.e., are costly to the person receiving the behavior. Similarly, giving status and not showing hostility might be conceived as rewarding, while denying status and showing hostility may be thought to be costs.

Any social situation can be characterized by the exchange of reinforcements that are received or given, the level of intimacy (related to the time during which the social relationships exist), and the relative status of the two participants. The cross-cultural differences in the perception of the meaning of these behaviors suggest that it is possible for members of two cultures to perceive the same situation in very different terms, and for the exchange of reinforcements to be very different for the two individuals.

"Interaction mistakes" can occur because of differences in the perception of social behavior not only on the main dimensions of affect and intimacy, but also on correlated dimensions, such as status or hostility. For example, it is reasonable to speculate that when there is a status gap, the high status person may be allowed to deny status and the low status person would be required

to give status. Misunderstandings might occur if a low status American misperceives the amount of status he is giving by accepting as a close kin by marriage or a low status Greek misperceives the amount of status he is giving by competing with, flattering, discussing with, informing, complimenting, and looking up to. In other words, the latter set of behaviors may seem very status giving to the Greek, while the American sees them as only moderately status giving. Thus, a Greek may expect appropriate behavior by the American in exchange for the "extra" status the Greek has conferred on him. If the American fails to perceive the Greek's behavior as "giving status," the Greek is likely to perceive him as "ungrateful."

Finally, Americans may see less hostility in quarreling with, competing with, etc., and thus behaviors which the Americans see as involving very little implication of hostility may arouse considerable hostility among Greeks. On the other hand, the Greeks may see little implication about hostility for growing impatient with while Americans see it as rather hostile.

Thus, the present study suggests that a variety of "misunderstandings" may occur between members of two cultures due to differences in the perception of social behaviors.

Clearly, these are suggestions that need to be tested in further research, but they indicate considerable fruitfulness of the present approach in the determination of which behaviors are appropriate in a cross-cultural setting.

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